



[BILLING CODE: 6750-01P]

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION

[File No. 201-0074]

Tri Star Energy, LLC; Analysis of Consent Orders to Aid Public Comment

AGENCY: Federal Trade Commission.

ACTION: Proposed Consent Agreement; Request for Comment.

SUMMARY: The consent agreement in this matter settles alleged violations of federal law prohibiting unfair methods of competition. The attached Analysis to Aid Public Comment describes both the allegations in the complaint and the terms of the consent order—embodied in the consent agreement—that would settle these allegations.

DATES: Comments must be received on or before [INSERT DATE 30 DAYS AFTER PUBLICATION IN THE *FEDERAL REGISTER*].

ADDRESSES: Interested parties may file comments online or on paper, by following the instructions in the Request for Comment part of the **SUPPLEMENTARY**

INFORMATION section below. Please write: “Tri Star Energy, LLC; File No. 201-0074” on your comment, and file your comment online at <https://www.regulations.gov> by following the instructions on the web-based form. If you prefer to file your comment on paper, please mail your comment to the following address: Federal Trade Commission, Office of the Secretary, 600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite CC-5610 (Annex D), Washington, DC 20580; or deliver your comment to the following address: Federal Trade Commission, Office of the Secretary, Constitution Center, 400 7th Street SW, 5th Floor, Suite 5610 (Annex D), Washington, DC 20024.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ashley Masters (202-326-2291), Bureau of Competition, Federal Trade Commission, 600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20580.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Pursuant to Section 6(f) of the Federal Trade Commission Act, 15 U.S.C. 46(f), and FTC Rule 2.34, 16 CFR § 2.34, notice is hereby given that the above-captioned consent agreement containing a consent order to cease and desist, having been filed with and accepted, subject to final approval, by the Commission, has been placed on the public record for a period of thirty (30) days. The following Analysis of Agreement Containing Consent Orders to Aid Public Comment describes the terms of the consent agreement and the allegations in the complaint. An electronic copy of the full text of the consent agreement package can be obtained from the FTC Website (for June 24, 2020), at this web address: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/commission-actions>.

You can file a comment online or on paper. For the Commission to consider your comment, we must receive it on or before [INSERT DATE 30 DAYS AFTER PUBLICATION IN THE *FEDERAL REGISTER*]. Write “Tri Star Energy, LLC; File No. 201-0074” on your comment. Your comment—including your name and your state—will be placed on the public record of this proceeding, including, to the extent practicable, on the <https://www.regulations.gov> website.

Due to the public health emergency in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and the agency’s heightened security screening, postal mail addressed to the Commission will be subject to delay. We strongly encourage you to submit your comments online through the <https://www.regulations.gov> website.

If you prefer to file your comment on paper, write “Tri Star Energy, LLC; File No. 201-0074” on your comment and on the envelope, and mail your comment to the following address: Federal Trade Commission, Office of the Secretary, 600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Suite CC-5610 (Annex D), Washington, DC 20580; or deliver your comment to the following address: Federal Trade Commission, Office of the Secretary, Constitution Center, 400 7th Street SW, 5th Floor, Suite 5610 (Annex D), Washington, DC 20024. If possible, submit your paper comment to the Commission by courier or overnight service.

Because your comment will be placed on the publicly accessible website at <https://www.regulations.gov>, you are solely responsible for making sure that your comment does not include any sensitive or confidential information. In particular, your comment should not include any sensitive personal information, such as your or anyone else’s Social Security number; date of birth; driver’s license number or other state identification number, or foreign country equivalent; passport number; financial account number; or credit or debit card number. You are also solely responsible for making sure your comment does not include any sensitive health information, such as medical records or other individually identifiable health information. In addition, your comment should not include any “trade secret or any commercial or financial information which . . . is privileged or confidential” – as provided by Section 6(f) of the FTC Act, 15 U.S.C. 46(f), and FTC Rule 4.10(a)(2), 16 CFR 4.10(a)(2) – including in particular competitively sensitive information such as costs, sales statistics, inventories, formulas, patterns, devices, manufacturing processes, or customer names.

Comments containing material for which confidential treatment is requested must be filed in paper form, must be clearly labeled “Confidential,” and must comply with FTC Rule 4.9(c). In particular, the written request for confidential treatment that accompanies the comment must include the factual and legal basis for the request, and must identify the specific portions of the comment to be withheld from the public record. *See* FTC Rule 4.9(c). Your comment will be kept confidential only if the General Counsel grants your request in accordance with the law and the public interest. Once your comment has been posted on the public FTC Website – as legally required by FTC Rule 4.9(b) – we cannot redact or remove your comment from the FTC Website, unless you submit a confidentiality request that meets the requirements for such treatment under FTC Rule 4.9(c), and the General Counsel grants that request.

Visit the FTC Website at <http://www.ftc.gov> to read this Notice and the news release describing this matter. The FTC Act and other laws that the Commission administers permit the collection of public comments to consider and use in this proceeding, as appropriate. The Commission will consider all timely and responsive public comments that it receives on or before [INSERT DATE 30 DAYS AFTER PUBLICATION IN THE *FEDERAL REGISTER*]. For information on the Commission’s privacy policy, including routine uses permitted by the Privacy Act, see <https://www.ftc.gov/site-information/privacy-policy>.

Analysis of Consent Orders to Aid Public Comment

I. Introduction

The Federal Trade Commission (“Commission”) has accepted for public comment, subject to final approval, an Agreement Containing Consent Orders (“Consent

Agreement”) from Tri Star Energy, LLC (“Tri Star”) and Hollingsworth Oil Company, Inc., C & H Properties, and Ronald L. Hollingsworth (“Hollingsworth” and collectively, the “Respondents”). The Consent Agreement is designed to remedy the anticompetitive effects that likely would result from Tri Star’s proposed acquisition of retail fuel assets from Hollingsworth.

Under the terms of the proposed Consent Agreement, Tri Star must divest to the upfront buyer, Cox Oil Company, Inc. (“Cox”), retail fuel assets in two local markets in Tennessee. Tri Star must complete the divestiture within 10 days after the closing of Tri Star’s acquisition of Hollingsworth. The Commission and Respondents have agreed to an Order to Maintain Assets that requires Respondents to operate and maintain each divestiture outlet in the normal course of business through the date Cox acquires the outlet.

The Commission has placed the proposed Consent Agreement on the public record for 30 days to solicit comments from interested persons. Comments received during this period will become part of the public record. After 30 days, the Commission will again review the proposed Consent Agreement and the comments received, and will decide whether it should withdraw from the Consent Agreement, modify it, or make it final.

II. The Respondents

Respondent Tri Star, a company headquartered in Nashville, Tennessee, owns and operates convenience stores and retail fuel outlets throughout Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, and Kentucky. Tri Star operates 89 convenience stores with attached retail fuel outlets, including 82 in Tennessee. Tri Star’s convenience stores operate under the Twice

Daily, Hightail, and t-Fuel names, and its retail fuel outlets sell under a variety of third-party branded and unbranded fuel banners. Tri Star also supplies fuel to a network of 285 dealer locations.

Respondent Mr. Ronald L. Hollingsworth, a resident of the state of Tennessee, controls both Hollingsworth Oil Company, Inc. and C & H Properties, entities operating in Tennessee. Hollingsworth operates a network of 54 convenience stores under the Sudden Service name with attached retail fuel outlets throughout middle Tennessee. Hollingsworth provides a variety of third-party branded and unbranded fuels at its Sudden Service outlets and to 172 wholesale fuel locations.

III. The Proposed Acquisition

On March 6, 2020, Tri Star entered into an agreement to acquire certain retail fuel outlets and other interests, from Hollingsworth and related entities (the “Acquisition”). The Acquisition would expand Tri Star’s presence throughout middle Tennessee.

The Commission’s Complaint alleges that the Acquisition, if consummated, would violate Section 7 of the Clayton Act, as amended, 15 U.S.C. § 18, and that the Acquisition agreement constitutes a violation of Section 5 of the Federal Trade Commission Act, as amended, 15 U.S.C. § 45, by substantially lessening competition for the retail sale of gasoline and the retail sale of diesel in each of two local markets in Tennessee.

IV. The Retail Sales of Gasoline and Diesel

The Commission’s Complaint alleges that the relevant product markets in which to analyze the Acquisition are the retail sale of gasoline and the retail sale of diesel fuel. Consumers require gasoline for their gasoline-powered vehicles and can purchase

gasoline only at retail fuel outlets. Likewise, consumers require diesel for their diesel-powered vehicles and can purchase diesel only at retail fuel outlets. The retail sale of gasoline and the retail sale of diesel fuel constitute separate relevant markets because the two are not interchangeable – vehicles that run on gasoline cannot run on diesel and vehicles that run on diesel cannot run on gasoline.

The Commission's Complaint alleges the relevant geographic markets in which to assess the competitive effects of the Acquisition are two local markets in and around Whites Creek, Tennessee, and Greenbrier, Tennessee.

The geographic markets for retail gasoline and retail diesel are highly localized, ranging up to a few miles, depending on local circumstances. Each relevant market is distinct and fact-dependent, reflecting a number of considerations, including commuting patterns, traffic flows, and outlet characteristics. Consumers typically choose between nearby retail fuel outlets with similar characteristics along their planned routes. The geographic markets for the retail sale of diesel are likely similar to the corresponding geographic markets for retail gasoline as many diesel consumers exhibit the same preferences and behaviors as gasoline consumers.

The Acquisition would eliminate competition in these local markets, resulting in a merger to monopoly in each market for the retail sale of gasoline and the retail sale of diesel fuel. Retail fuel outlets compete on price, store format, product offerings, and location, and pay close attention to competitors in close proximity, on similar traffic flows, and with similar store characteristics. The combined entity would be able to raise prices unilaterally in the two local markets. Absent the Acquisition, Tri Star and Hollingsworth would continue to compete head to head in these local markets.

Entry into each relevant market would not be timely, likely, or sufficient to deter or counteract the anticompetitive effects arising from the Acquisition.

Significant entry barriers include the availability of attractive real estate, the time and cost associated with constructing a new retail fuel outlet, and the time associated with obtaining necessary permits and approvals.

V. The Proposed Consent Agreement

The proposed Consent Agreement would remedy the Acquisition's likely anticompetitive effects by requiring Tri Star to divest certain Tri Star and Hollingsworth retail fuel assets to Cox in each local market.

The proposed Consent Agreement requires that the divestiture be completed no later than 10 days after Tri Star consummates the Acquisition. The proposed Consent Agreement further requires Tri Star and Hollingsworth to maintain the economic viability, marketability, and competitiveness of each divestiture asset until the divestiture to Cox is complete. For up to twelve months following the divestiture, Tri Star and Hollingsworth must make available transitional services, as needed, to assist Cox with the divestiture assets.

In addition to requiring outlet divestitures, the proposed Consent Agreement also requires Respondents to provide the Commission notice before re-acquiring the divested outlets for ten years. The prior notice provision is necessary because an acquisition of either or both divested assets would likely raise the same competitive concerns and may fall below the HSR Act premerger notification thresholds.

The proposed Consent Agreement contains additional provisions designed to ensure the effectiveness of the proposed relief. For example, Respondents have agreed to

an Order to Maintain Assets that will issue at the time the proposed Consent Agreement is accepted for public comment. The Order to Maintain Assets requires Respondents to operate and maintain each divestiture outlet in the normal course of business, through the date the Respondents complete the divestiture. The Commission may appoint an independent third party as a Monitor to oversee the Respondents' compliance with the requirements of the proposed Consent Agreement.

The purpose of this analysis is to facilitate public comment on the proposed Consent agreement, and the Commission does not intend this analysis to constitute an official interpretation of the proposed Consent Agreement or to modify its terms in any way.

By direction of the Commission, Commissioner Slaughter not participating.

April J. Tabor,

Secretary.